



Discovery of a vast corpus of Berber *arraten* documents

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Figure. 1. *Argania spinosa* in the Atlas Mountains, endemic of southwest Morocco.

monumental researchers and explorers such as Swen Hedin, Sir Arthur John Evans and Sir Marc Aurel Stein.

The co-author of this paper, Hamza Elbahraoui, is an antique dealer based in Rabat, Morocco. Once within a large basket of purchased antique tribal items, he discovered a curious artefact – a plate of argan wood (*Argania spinosa*, see below [Figure 1](#)).

It was of about palm size, with both sides covered in hand-written Arabic letters, apparently in the old Maghrebi Arabic language. Through consultations with several antique dealers, it transpired that the plate is an old legal deed of the Anti-Atlas Mountains Berbers. The artefact was unusual, charming and seemingly quite old. It was uncommon to discover such an artefact in northern Morocco, and in the city of Rabat in particular.

Hamza Elbahraoui began intermittently but systematically buying such argan manuscripts from other dealers, generally in large batches of up to 400 pieces. Online sales of such documents then followed.

In the traditional Arabic, there is a special word for the documents recorded on wood: '*alwah*' (plural; *lawh* – single) (Afa 1984). Often, it relates to religious texts; the Qur'an is said to have been written on wooden *alwah* tablets. *Alwah* are also associated with wooden boards used in the teaching process. The discovered wooden documents have been recognised as *alwah* by Prof. Léon Buskens and Dr. Mohamed Saadouni.

Nevertheless, over the last four years, the second author, Igor managed to assemble a collection of a few thousand *arraten* items. Poisonous thoughts, the dread of every collector, curator or ethnographer, were always present: are they authentic – those artefacts – and not forgeries? Are they real, those strange descriptions of Berber villages? Dr. Bogusław R. Zagórski (2015) directly confirmed such suspicions, describing in a personal conversation his own purchases and his feelings as: 'Who knows what those strange wooden documents are? There was no way for me to verify that they are not forgeries for naïve Western tourists ...'

Owning a collection of diverse antique manuscripts, Igor Kliakhandler never saw anything of this sort; and of course his academic interest was stirred by such unusual artefacts. The purchase circumstances, described by Hamza, always left a feeling of mystery and of Scheherazade tales, improbable in the current 21st century. After all, the Internet and cable TV are omnipresent. Authenticity and provenance are of utmost importance for a Western-minded collector or museum curator. A few attempts to find more information about *arraten* through the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) in Rabat, which we personally visited, were not successful. The IRCAM facilitated publishing of substantial material about Berber culture and is widely credited as an important part of the Berber cultural Renaissance. We will mention, among many, only one recent book by Umar Afa (2015), 'Amazigh Manuscripts and Documents Written in the Arabic Script'. Yet, we could not find any information or reports on the nature of *arraten* documents through IRCAM.

Being legal documents, *arraten* constitute an indispensable part of legal practices and so-called 'customary law' of southern Morocco tribes. The fusion of segmented tribal 'customary law' with more unifying Islamic legal influence represents a captivating field of study. The historical development and transformation of Morocco's legal landscape from pre-colonial time to colonial rule, through independence and with current Berber reawakening, is the subject of many works (see fascinating review by Buskens 2021). Nevertheless, it seems that *arraten* have not been widely studied. Later, we discovered two books (Al-Uthmani 2004; Amshra 2014), not easily available for the Western reader, where studies of mostly paper *arraten* were presented. But we could not find anything definitive of *arraten* origin or their authenticity. Explanations of antique shop dealers were not convincing ...

Google does not produce anything meaningful for the words *arra* or *arraten*. In the city of Agadir *Mdina*, we were explicitly told that no such wooden artefacts exist. Undeterred and determined to check the provenance and verify the origin of *arraten*, we then set off to explore the remote Atlas Mountains. Reality far exceeded our wildest expectations ...

In the historical context, one should remember that some of the greatest discoveries in archeology have been made thanks to antique dealers. Sir Arthur John Evans discovered Cretan scripts after a purchase of stone

was made, whereupon we were followed throughout the entire evening into the next morning.

Such interactions occurred with regularity deep in the mountainous tribal region. Eventually, we somewhat learnt to avoid unnecessary encounters and to react to those circumstances with humour, patience, and understanding. In spite of those small security troubles, overall, the travel went relatively smoothly, though quite strenuously. The local Berbers were very hospitable and cordial. Almost every single time, an invitation to drink tea followed – and it was highly impolite to not take the prescribed amount of time or not to demonstrate a good degree of respect. In general, the whole interaction with Berbers was very pleasant.

Nevertheless, while being very hospitable, the local Berber population is quite suspicious of strangers. More than once we overheard conversations between Berbers: ‘What is this American looking for here? Why did he come to our village? He must be doing some important government job’. Conversations about government jobs and spying were a repetitive theme. But not even once did we experience any less than cordial smile, tea, hospitality, and fresh food.

First encounter

Driving into the mountains from the city of Agadir on the Atlantic coast, along the stretch from Ait Baha to Idaougnidif, we stopped near an abandoned mediaeval city on the edge of a cliff. Only one family still lives there. The head of the family, Mahjub Imodn, has a small tourist shop there. Mahjub has a distinct and memorable face, keen common sense, very mild pleasant manners, infinite hospitality and apparent knowledge of people – a true Berber. The very first thing that we encountered in his shop were argan manuscripts, see [Figure 2](#).

Altogether, he offered to sell about 100 pieces at around \$5 each. We immediately realised they were authentic. Mahjub is not a dealer and sells his personal items. He explained that those *arraten* were old legal documents. Though some such documents are still in use today, they are of no use in his abandoned town so are offered for sale. He kindly allowed us to photograph him, his shop and his artefacts and he consented that we use the photos in the paper and mention his name. He requested the paper to be sent to him as well. After buying a few *arraten* pieces and drinking traditional tea, we moved onward, much spirited by our first unexpected encounter.

Agadirs and large *arraten* caches

All our numerous requests to Berber families to show us *arraten* that they keep in their homes were politely declined. Papers by Prof. Léon Buskens

abandoned. This apparent neglect may be the result of the devastating earthquake of 29 February 1960. Likely, a global trend in depopulation of rural areas, visible from Central Asia to North Africa, and from Syria to China contributes to that, and perhaps the effects of climate change are at play as well.

Agadirs have smooth, high outside walls and towers; massive locked gates complete the image. Inside, there are many chambers/cellars, each belonging to a different Berber family. *Agadir* is different from *kasbah* or from *ksar* – people do not live in *agadirs* as in *kasbah* or *ksar*, except sometimes the *agadir* keeper, the *lamine*. Some *agadirs* date as far back as the 10th century (Raffaelli, Pedro, and Guerrera 2016). Flat stones, protruding from the walls, serve as stairs. At least 80% of the cellars have locks. Being inside an *agadir* is an eerie and magical feeling – time has congested and stopped here (see Figure 3 for some typical scene inside an *agadir*.)

Lamine, the trusted person of the village, holds the keys from the *agadir* and opens the gate upon request (tip is expected). Many tribes and villages in the Atlas Mountains have an *agadir*. The *agadirs* are generally three stories structures, climbing stony stairs is an adventure in itself, see Figure 3. We



Figure. 3. Typical scene inside of an *agadir*.

moved into the more abandoned and partially destroyed section, somewhat similar to that on [Figure 3](#).

Entering into the first low broken hanging door in a dark dusty low-ceiling chamber and turning on the light, we stumbled to it, see [Figure 4](#).

We suddenly saw documents scattered everywhere on the floor, in baskets, in large clay jars, and in boxes. We were overwhelmed with awe, shock, disbelief and surprise at the discovery of this first large cache of *arraten* manuscripts. They were found *in situ*, in their native setting, not in the shop of an antique dealer! In a state of tremendous excitement, we rather chaotically filmed and photographed in the darkness.

Following the first chamber, we found two more full of wooden argan documents and all were in the semi ruinous area of the *agadir*. They were lying around everywhere in these dark chambers, covered with dust, scattered, forgotten and abandoned. The arid climate of the Atlas Mountains saved the *arraten* artefacts – similar to the Tocharian manuscripts that were waiting in the arid climate of the Tarim desert to be discovered by Mark Aurel Stein.

Looking at our red excited faces with spider webs in our hair, the *lamine* smiled. When we left the *agadir*, she presented us with homemade bread and eggs. This, we understood, was an especially generous gift. Such hospitality is a deeply ingrained feature of Berbers.

We then visited many *agadirs*. The *lamine* usually allows entering into unlocked chambers and openly inspecting them. Not once did we have any problem with that. Moreover, such curiosity is expected and encouraged. *Lamines* are very proud to share the *agadirs'* history and show cellars and artefacts. Most of the cellars were, however, locked and impossible to inspect. Many chambers, even those without locks, were in bad shape on the second or third floors and not easily accessible. Nevertheless, in five *agadirs*, in chambers without locks, we discovered 13 chambers full of *arraten* documents. The chambers were usually in the more abandoned and much less visited sections. We discovered more wooden artefacts than paper or reed *arraten*. In each chamber, the number of manuscripts was in the many hundreds. We estimate therefore, very conservatively, that we discovered no less than 5000 *arraten* pieces. All that confirmed the authenticity of our own collection.

One cache of the documents was a particularly dramatic finding. We were carefully walking on a partially collapsed roof of a large *agadir*. Coming to one of the collapsed sections, we looked down at the inside. There we saw clay jars, boxes, and a few *arraten* pieces – and we already knew this was a good sign. With some trepidation, we jumped down through the broken roof into the chamber of the third floor. As in previous chambers, *arraten* documents were scattered around everywhere, especially in the large, darkest part of the chamber. We felt acute pity seeing them exposed to

Our main desire was to save the abandoned *arraten* as precious cultural and historical artefacts. But we could not take the matter into our own hands. It should be done in a transparent way, through legal channels and community efforts. We present below only the photos of our own private artefacts. We would like to caution future explorers against any hasty actions when the local population could see outsiders as 'grave robbers'. In addition, it is illegal in Morocco to remove *arraten* without explicit consent.

Anecdotal accounts claim that many families keep the wooden and paper deeds at home. We were able to directly confirm that. We were exploring an almost empty abandoned mediaeval town located near a riverbed. The houses, though ruined, still retained rare beauty and picturesque ornamentations. We made a trek along the riverbed. Mountains around still kept distinguishable ancient terraces. The well visible trail at the side of the riverbed, the beauty of the ruined houses, the mountain terraces around, and the strategic position of the town, suggest that it had once stood on a prosperous caravan trail. The town was almost empty – we met only one elderly woman collecting hay. We decided to explore the ruins. And almost immediately we found a heavy bag, one metre high by eighty centimetres wide, weighing at least 20 kilograms. It was stuffed full of argan *arraten*. Another pile of argan *arraten*, mixed with reed and rolled paper *arraten*, laid nearby. Unfortunately, the argan *arraten* were all covered by clayish hard crust. A constant flow of air in the ruined building was bringing dust, which was absorbed very well by the argan wood. This does not happen in *agadir* cellars, as mostly they do not have ventilation. In some distress at this neglect, we left the building. Nearby, in a dusty dark room of another building, we found a few piles of the argan *arraten*. All of these found *arraten* were encrusted with the dusty clay with which we were already all too familiar. It was frustrating to see the artefacts rendered useless. We decided not to investigate ruins further, though many more were available for inspection. Those two rooms with dusty argan and paper *arraten* pieces in town ruins are in addition to the chambers discovered in *agadirs*.

People moved away from the abandoned town in the search of a better life and took everything valuable with them. They left *arraten* behind as something heavy, bulky, and useless. It was sad to realise that. We believe that future generations will view *arraten* as precious cultural treasure and will reclaim their heritage.

It seems that paper *arraten* are less abundant than argan *arraten*. Paper *arraten* seem to be newer. In addition, in the not too far removed past, paper was imported and therefore a much more expensive and scarcer material than locally produced argan wood plates. A few of the paper *arraten* – from our own collection – contain very beautiful large texts. Those that are kept in reed capsules are better preserved, unless damaged by water. Some are 'corked' by rugs. Photographs of well-preserved large

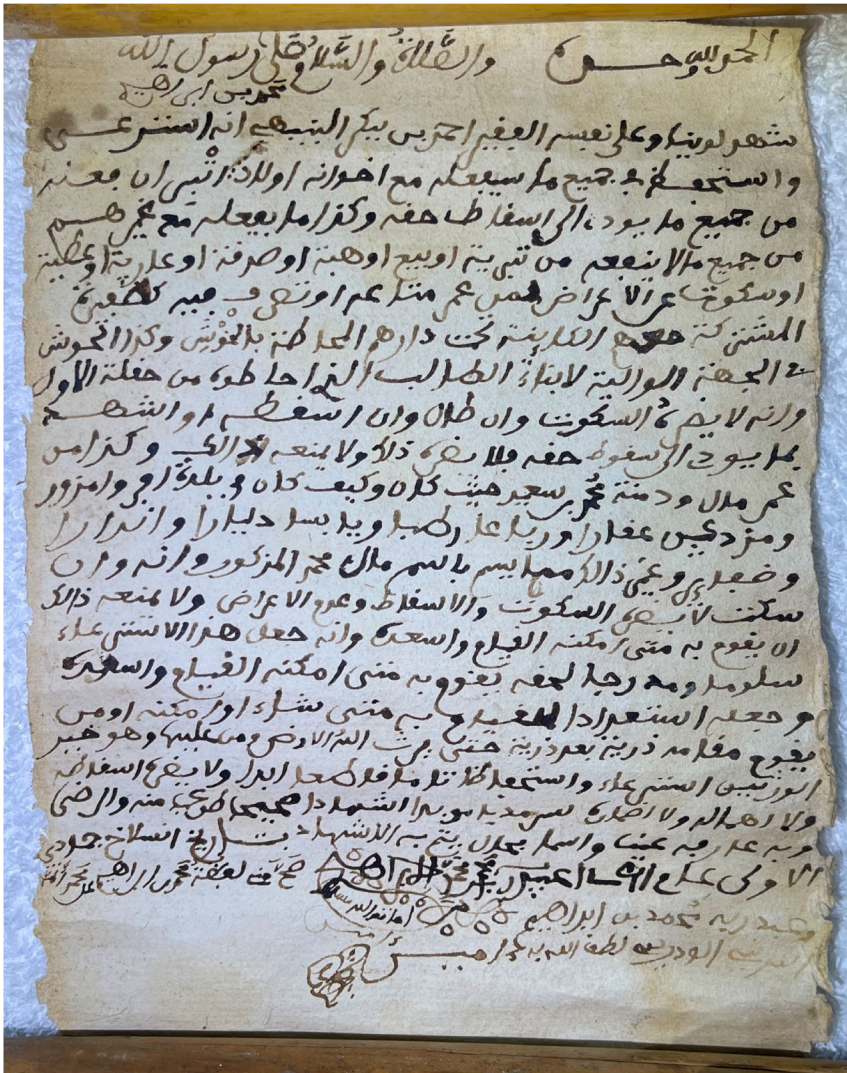


Figure 6. Arraten of double-palm size, Hijra year 1241.

The legal nature of *arraten* seems to be the chief reason why argan and paper artefacts are still held by the Berber families, in spite of apparent loss of their legal pertinence to modern times. Dr. Salima Naji confirmed that, describing that while only a few people in the Mountains can read the documents, families are afraid of unpleasant legal surprises that may be hidden in the documents and prefer to just keep them away to prevent spilling of old family secrets.

Berbers are not eager to talk about argan and paper documents, we soon discovered. We could not buy *arraten* unless they were already

Each *agadir* has no less than 100 chambers with up to 300 in large *agadirs*. So, we may estimate that, very conservatively, the Atlas Mountains contain no less than 25,000 cellars (more likely 80,000–100,000 cellars). We explored no more than 2% of all cellars in the Atlas Mountains (much more likely around 1%). The vast majority of the cellars are locked or not reachable. Many Berbers confirmed that *arraten* are also kept in private houses, not only in *agadirs*. We take into account (1) the dispersed nature of *agadirs*, (2) the nature of *arraten* storage, (3) the size of our own collection, (4) and the fact that we inspected only unlocked chambers. As a result, we estimate that, by a very conservative assessment, no less than 100,000 written wood documents probably exist, and likely as many as 500,000. In addition, no less than 40,000 paper documents likely exist, and perhaps as many as 150,000. Such a massive corpus could rival Cairo Geniza in scale, and will provide a vast body of material for future studies. It is astounding that such a massive corpus of written records still remains.

It seems that previously the entire mountainous area of southern Morocco was a prosperous agricultural region. This is obvious from the many abandoned villages and *agadirs*. Many mountain slopes have a recognisably old terrace structure. And the existence of so many *arraten* manuscripts is further evidence of prior active economic life in the area.

Without a doubt, preservation of such a massive corpus of documents should be a worthy goal for local Berber communities and the Moroccan government. Institutions such as the Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc may play an active role. The Endangered Archives Programme by the British Library can be an important venue. Everything must be done to save the *arraten* documents and their context and to not allow their excessive dispersal. Local conservation and local studies seem essential for such aim. Moroccan historian Hamid Triki (2015) called for protection of the documents against pillaging.

We are fully aware that our acquisition of a substantial cache of written records belonging to the entire ethnic group of the Atlas Mountain Berbers was a lucky stroke of serendipity. We are happy to make our collection of *arraten* documents available for the future study by all interested parties. We would consider donating the collection to a proper institution of higher education, library, or museum. Hopefully, that will provide an optimal venue for its study and preservation.

We have not disclosed here the precise location of the *agadirs* where we found the *arraten* artefacts. Taking into account the sensitivities of the local Berber population, we do not want to create a sudden rush of unwelcome interest into their cultural heritage. A slower approach is more suitable for this delicate task lying between anthropology, history and politics. At the same time, the artefacts are slowly disintegrating, and recorded past is being slowly obliterated. We feel that education combined with local efforts are the best recipe for their preservation.

Nevertheless, we witnessed first-hand that even today some pious religious Muslim Moroccans consider Berbers as almost non-believers. No wonder then that the Berber authentic cultural heritage, to a large degree, was and is still neglected.

We have seen that for the vast majority of native Moroccans, the very existence of these argan, reed and paper manuscripts is a genuine surprise with the exception of a very few experts and antique dealers. In spite of the often said dictum, 'Scratch a Moroccan, find a Berber', the very existence and nature of *agadirs* in the tribal Berber areas is completely unknown to most Moroccans. The vast majority of Moroccans only shrug when being told about *agadirs*.

Written records constitute an indispensable part of self-awareness of any ethnicity, nationality or nation. What would Greece be for us today if not for Herodotus? What would the Punic wars, Carthage, and the military genius of Hannibal be for us today, if not for Polybius? In the absence of written records, ethnography and archeology try to fill the void. But historical memory exists mostly on the basis of written documents. Folklore, ethnography, archeology cannot replace letters. Cultural Berber Renaissance produced remarkable literature (Afa 2015; Amarir 1975; Boogert 1997; Stroomer 2001, among many other books). We believe that the Berber Renaissance relates to the authentic *arraten* documents as well. It seems that though being somewhat known, *arraten* manuscripts have not been seriously studied. We believe that the recovery of the Amazigh language, renaissance of culture, and historical memories of Berbers will reclaim all their pertinent written records. We hope that our discovery (or, in some way, re-discovery) and access to our collection will help to recover the Berber unique authentic heritage.

It is very peculiar and interesting that the well-known Albertini Tablets (Merriells 2018), discovered in neighbouring Algeria, are also written in close fashion – on plates of cedar wood. Dr. Bogusław R. Zagórski (2015) noted their remarkable similarity. It is striking that the span between Albertini tablets and *arraten* documents is about 1200 years and no less than 1000 kilometres. Quite possibly, other discoveries in this region, of similar artefacts, will follow.

Analysis of the *arraten*

The full analysis and cataloguing of the discovered vast corpus of the wood and paper *arraten* documents will take many years. It is probable and desirable that comprehensive studies ought to be undertaken in collaboration with local linguists, ethnographers, and historians. The old Maghrebi Arabic is not well known in either the Atlas Mountains or in Morocco in general, so this is likely to hamper the process. As Prof. Lameen Souag noticed, word endings in *arraten* are often missing (as if written by a court stenographer in a hurry).

3. Other property transactions (transfer, trust, lease, etc.)
4. Marriage arrangements
5. Money loaning
6. Status changes (adoptions, guardianships)
7. Wills, inheritance and distribution of property
8. Inter-tribal affairs; in particular, documents stating rules of *agadir* use
9. Agreement and issues between different tribes

Among the documents of our collection, we identified a unique archive that pertains to the agreements between two tribes about use of the marketplace. The archive is translated and will be published elsewhere.

It seems that the *arraten* documents encompass a very broad spectrum of social, economic and business life in the Atlas Mountains in a period of about the last four hundred years, as per cursory study of the Hijra dates in the documents. We could compare our artefacts only with those described by Prof. Léon Buskens in his papers (2017, 2020, 2021). However, the majority of paper *arraten* discovered by us are relatively small pieces and differ substantially from the photos of Prof. Léon Buskens. In addition, the native word *arraten* and its connotation were not mentioned or discussed. Finally, it seems that we did not encounter signatures of any professional witnesses, *udul*, in our *arraten* paper documents. And we did not encounter removed *udul* signatures either, as described in his papers. It is possible that *udul*, professional witnesses in large cities, may have been absent in small mountain villages and towns. The same assertion was referenced in the review paper by Makdisi (1999): 'It is without doubt that in Morocco the practice of *laffif* was propagated, on account of the difficulty of finding *udul* outside the cities ...'. At least a substantial part of the documents studied by Prof. Léon Buskens came from the Arab-dominated large cities such as Rabat, Fez and Casablanca of northeast Morocco region with a different legal landscape. It is possible that a separate study will be necessary to elucidate the legal features of Berber *arraten*.

Usually, wood and paper *arraten* were purchased through second-hand curio trade of antique dealers (Buskens 2017, 2020; Zagórski 2015). Prof. Léon Buskens (2017, 187) writes about his experience dealing with wood documents through his close friend and dealer: 'Mostafa also offered me several lots of dozens of pieces'. Albums by Ivo Grammet and Min De Meersman (1998) and Salima Naji (2006) show the *arraten* in their native *agadir* environment. Yet, it seems that we happen to be the first to discover and assess the sheer scale of *arraten* archives.

It is remarkable that such a massive corpus of documents survived all the historical upheavals. The remote nature and arid climate of the Atlas Mountains preserved them. The digitalisation of our collection is underway. As paper objects are of different sizes, ranging from the size of a half-palm to a large sheet, a proper unified digital protocol should be used and maintained.

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